

# SPIRITUAL SIGHT AND THE DEATH-DEFYING, HEAVEN-CONFORMING COMMUNITY OF CHRIST

From Matthew 16:13-20

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## INTRODUCTION

1. Illustration: there are times in our lives when “seeing” changes us.
2. Transition: The most important perceiving we’ll ever do is the glory of Christ. This perceiving not only changes our outlook but our very identity.
3. Proposition: **Since God alone gives true spiritual sight; those who truly see are called to commit themselves to the death-defying, heaven-conforming community of God’s Son.**

BODY: A couple weeks ago, pastor Ty explained how 15:22 (the feeding of the 5k) - 16:20 (today’s passage) essentially form one unit that illustrate genuine faith. Genuine faith is not about your family lineage; it’s not about proper religious ritual. Genuine faith is about recognizing who Jesus is and trusting fully in Him. Or as Paul writes in 2 Cor. 4:6:

<sup>6</sup>For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

This morning we’ll unpack the last section in this unit which serves as this Gospel’s clearest confession of the “glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” and explains what results among those in whose hearts God’s light has shone.

This morning, I want us to see two essential truths that, I pray, will help us enjoy God more by stirring up in us a greater love for Jesus and His church.

## 1. God alone gives true spiritual sight (13-17)

[Read 13-17]

- a. Christ: The object of true spiritual sight (13-16)

As we’ve just read, these first three verses comprise Peter’s confession or acknowledgement of Jesus’ true identity. Prior to this point, the reader knows that Jesus is the Messiah or “Christ” (“Anointed One”) but only by way of editorial comment by the author (c.f. 1:1,16-18; 11:2).

On the whole, people weren’t quite sure what to do with Jesus. He didn’t really fit in any of their boxes. Of course, from our vantage point, it seems obvious who Jesus is – or at least who Matthew thinks Jesus is. But it wasn’t obvious then.

“On the one hand, he’s doing some pretty miraculous stuff. But on the other hand, he comes from Nazareth (has anything good come out of Nazareth?). Sure, he teaches as one with authority, but he’s saying things that the religious *authorities* don’t like very much.”

As a result, people were divided over Jesus. And that was exactly the point. In our passage this morning, Jesus brings the disciples, specifically Peter, to a point of decision – or rather, confession.

In the region of Caesarea Philippi, a polis known for its pagan immorality in northern Israel, Jesus asks two

questions to highlight the contrast between popular opinion and the disciples' understanding of the identity of Jesus [Read 13b].

"Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets" - none of these titles are necessarily negative. Indeed many thought of Jesus as a prophet, a true man of God who spoke from God. And these people weren't entirely wrong. Many aspects of Jesus' ministry corresponded closely to the ministries of these men.

But even these titles fall far short of Jesus' true designation. Simon Peter knows this; so he speaks up, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

The disciples had already confessed that Jesus was the Son of God in 14:33. So it was ascribing the title of Christ/Messiah ('anointed one') that sets Peter's confession apart. Here we see that Peter (and the others) did not just view Jesus as one among many, but as *the one*. "The climactic figure in whom God's purpose is finally being accomplished."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus affirms Peter's designation by blessing him: "Blessed are you, Simon barjona..."

Where the beatitudes in Matthew 5 outline what the 'good life' is within the new covenant community of God, every one of those true blessings flow first from true spiritual sight, the object of which is Jesus Christ.

No one can have the good life without first seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Christ is the object of true spiritual sight.

b. God: The source of true spiritual sight (17)

If true spiritual sight is about seeing Jesus for who he is: the Christ, the Son of the Living God, how do people apprehend who Jesus is? How do people come to recognize Jesus as more than just a moral teacher, prophet, etc?

"Flesh and blood did not reveal this, but my Father who is in Heaven."

Wait, wasn't Jesus flesh and blood? Wasn't Peter's confession the result of witnessing, being in proximity to, learning from Jesus himself? Wasn't this recognition owing, in some part, to Peter's personal experience, intellect, or rationality? Nope!

This eternally-significant recognition did not come from Peter's flesh and blood or any one else's flesh and blood. The truth of Jesus' identity came from the Father alone.

c. So what?<sup>2</sup>

- i. We should reflect on the goodness of God: true spiritual sight is not limited by human intellect!

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<sup>1</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, in TNICNT, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 618.

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<sup>2</sup> Taken from: Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light," 1734

- ii. We should examine ourselves: merely apprehending true things about Jesus is not the same as spiritually perceiving and delighting in the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.
- iii. We should seek this supernatural sight: there is no more excellent, joyful, effectual knowledge in the universe than the light that comes from glimpsing the glory of Jesus.

*The souls of natural men are so blinded that they see no beauty or excellency in Christ. They do not see his sufficiency. They see no beauty in the work of salvation by him; and as long as they remain thus blind, it is impossible that they should close with Christ. The heart will never be drawn to an unknown Saviour. It is impossible that a man should love that, and freely choose that, and rejoice in that, in which he sees no excellency.*

*But if your eyes were opened to see the excellency of Christ, the work would be done. You would immediately believe on him; and you would find your heart going after him. It would be impossible to keep it back. But take heed that you do not entertain a wrong notion of what it is, spiritually to see Christ. If you do, you may seek that which God never bestows. Do not think that spiritually to see Christ, is to have a vision of him as the prophets had, to see him in some bodily shape, to see the features of his countenance. Do not pray or seek for any such thing as this.*

*But what you are to seek is, that you may have a sight of the glorious excellency of Christ, and of the way of salvation through him, in your heart. This is a spiritual sight of Christ. This is that for which you must cry to God day and night. God is the fountain of spiritual light. He opens the eyes of the blind. He commands the light to shine out of*

*darkness. It is easy with God to enlighten the soul, and fill it with these glorious discoveries, though it is beyond the power of men and angels.<sup>3</sup>*

(1) God alone gives true spiritual sight

## **2. Spiritual sight delivers those who have it out from this world and into Christ's church (18-20)**

Apprehending Jesus' identity changes our own. In Christ we are neither free agents nor *genuinely* affiliated with any other group, except the Church.

Three things we learn about the Church:

- a. Peter is the first leader of the Church (18a)

In response to Simon's formal naming of Jesus, Jesus formally names Simon, Petros ("rock") which was a very unusual name. It's unconventionality was, of course, the point.<sup>4</sup> Just as large rocks functioned to support the building of physical structures, so too "Simon the Rock" would function to support the building of Jesus' church/assembly.

For this reason, I believe the text speaks to the functional primacy of *Peter* in the early church rather

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<sup>3</sup> The Works of Jonathan Edwards Vol. 2 (Peabody, MA; Hendrickson Publishers, Inc; 2007) p. 829. Occasional Sermons – Sermon 1.

<sup>4</sup> There is no known use of the Greek word petros as a name, though there is one such usage for the identical Aramaic term (see J. A. Fitzmyer, *Text and Interpretation*, p. 127)

than to the enduring primacy and legacy of his *office*.<sup>5</sup>

Though Matthew records Peter being given bind and loose, only a few chapters later, this same authority is said to have been given to the twelve as well (18:18). It would be misleading to use this passage as a proof text for papal authority. In light of how the rest of the NT speaks of Christ as the foundation stone of the church, it's probably most appropriate to consider Peter the first of many "living stones" (1 Peter 2:4-8) God has and continues to use to build His church.

Which leads us to the second thing we learn about the church.

b. Jesus is the owner and builder of the Church (18a)

Jesus is the owner and the builder of the Church. Matthew is the only gospel to use the term "church." Moreover, this is the first time in the NT "church" is used. Though there were plenty of assemblies in Jesus' day (Roman and Jewish), it was most commonly heard in reference to the community of Israel in the Greek OT.

It's striking that in this passage that we learn Jesus intends to establish and build his *own* assembly, his own community. Israel's Messiah comes, not to reestablish Israel, but to establish His own kingdom

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<sup>5</sup> Hegesippus in the 150's AD was the first to tie the authority of the apostles to their successors as an apologetic tool against the gnostic heresy.

whose participants will be identified with Him and Him alone. Is this boldness arrogant or beautiful?

c. There is death-defying power in the Church (18b)

Since the Church is Christ's and it's Christ who builds it, it is no surprise that we find the promise that we do at the end of 18. "And the gates of Hades will not over power it."

Hades (Gk) = Sheol (Hb) in OT = "death"

I said, In the middle<sup>[a]</sup> of my days

I must depart;

I am consigned to the gates of Sheol

for the rest of my years (Isaiah 38:10; cf Job 17:16).

"Gates of Hades" = "the imprisoning power of death"<sup>6</sup>

The promise is that the imprisoning power of death will not overcome Jesus' church. This is true of the institution and the people who comprise it because it is ultimately true about Jesus himself! The Church cannot be destroyed because Jesus cannot be destroyed!

d. The witness of the church must be heaven-conforming (19-20)

Lastly, this passage teaches us about the heaven-conforming witness of the church. Let me unpack that

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<sup>6</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 624.

a bit. In verse 19, Jesus metaphorically 'gives' Peter (who represents the twelve) the 'keys to the Kingdom.' Possession of these metaphorical keys is somehow associated with the ability to 'bind' and 'loose' on Earth in a way connected with heaven.

1. What are the keys? – the image here comes straight out of Isaiah 22:20-22 and is that of a steward who has both a measure of derivative authority and responsibility to care for that which has been put in his charge. R.T. France sums it up best:

*The keys are those of storehouses, to enable him to make appropriate provision for the household, not those of the outer gate, to control admission. The traditional portrayal of Peter as porter at the pearly gates depends on misunderstanding "the kingdom of heaven" here as a designation of the afterlife rather than denoting God's rule among his people on earth.<sup>7</sup>*

2. What does it mean to bind and loose? Binding and loosing were rabbinic terms used to declare what was and wasn't permitted.<sup>8</sup> The stewardship authority of Peter and the apostles was an administrative one that gave them a unique privilege to decide disputes and settle controversial matters. It's important to note that while the apostles had unique authority to settle

theological issues in the early church (the record of which comprises the NT), local church elders are given similar authority to apply biblical principles to their particular context (1 Peter 5:1-5).

3. How is this binding and loosing connected with heaven?

"Will be bound/loosed in heaven" (ESV) or "will have been bound/loosed in heaven" (NASB)?

Heaven doesn't conform to the dictates of church leaders. Church leaders, when administering their leadership with boldness and humility, bring the church into conformity with heaven.

The church should be working to realize Matthew 6:9-10:

"Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be your name. **Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.**"

This work of Jesus' church (binding and loosing), insofar as it is done correctly at the local level, brings the world-wide church into conformity with heaven.

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 625.

<sup>8</sup> See Z. W. Falk, JJS 25 (1974), 92-100.

This morning, I wanted us to see two essential truths to help us enjoy God more by stirring up in us a greater love for Jesus and His church (1) God alone gives true spiritual sight and (2) Spiritual sight delivers those who have it out from this world and into Christ's church.

Grads, devote your life to these two things: (1) seeking out the excellences of Christ in every aspect of your studies, vocation, and relationships and (2) commit your life to joining with the death-defying, heaven-conforming community of Christ.